

Tudor Dinu (Bucharest)

**THE LEGEND OF THE ARGONAUTS  
IN PROCOPIUS' OF CAESAREA GOTHIC WARS**

In the fourth book of his Gothic Wars, before presenting the relations between the Byzantines and the Persians after 550 A.D., as well as the conflict that opposed the two powers for control over the Lazicum region lying on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, Procopius offers a description of the south and east shores of the Pontus Euxinus and of the Caucasian region, description destined to provide his reader with the basic geographical coordinates that could enable him to follow the account of the historical events in their own setting. The choice of the writer was influenced also by the fact that, although during his age some works by ancient authors on the same topic were still available, they were not corresponding to his high standards. Without naming these authors, Procopius blames them for important errors and inadvertences that he illustrates by examples. He also argues that their works aren't anymore up to date, because of the numerous changes produced in the geography of the region by the implacable lapse of the time. By these statements he stands out from most Greek historians of the Roman and Byzantine periods, who, seemingly convinced by the immutability of geographical facts, weren't hesitating to take over information regarding the furthestmost regions of the globe from the works of authors who had lived many centuries or even one millennium before. Another usual feature of the Greek history writing was the intermixture of historical data and mythical or legendary facts in the geographical and ethnographic descriptions. Programmatically turning away from this practice, Procopius clearly states: "I think that history is far away from the legend (μύθου γὰρ ἱστορίαν παρὰ πολὺ κερῶρισθαι οἶμαι, 8.1.13.1-2) and ensures his reader that he won't provide him with legendary information or with one concerning facts too

ancient to be well known (οὐ τὰ μυθώδη περὶ αὐτῶν ἀπαγγέλλοντι ἢ ἄλλως ἀρχαῖα, 8.1.12.2-3). And in order to make his message clearer the historian specifies that he won't utter an opinion on the place where Prometheus was supposed to have been put into chains (οὐδὲ ὅπη ποτὲ Πόντου τοῦ Εὐξείνου δεθῆναι τὸν Προμηθεῖα ποιηταὶ λέγουσι, 8.1.12.3-13.1). In his description of the Pontus he will present – we may infer – only well documented geographical, ethnographical and historical information, that aim to represent an important qualitative leap as compared to his predecessors.

Nevertheless in the second chapter of the fourth book, that comprises the description of Pontus, no less than three passages concerning the legend of the Argonauts occur. This one is however perceived by the Byzantine historian, as we shall show in the following lines, as an unchallenged historical reality in contrast to Prometheus myth, the *par excellence* legend of the Caucasus. Like every Greek, Procopius automatically connects the expedition of the Argonauts with this part of the world, considering it as the event that had the longest lasting influence on the Pontic region.

The first trace of the Argonauts' voyage encountered by the traveller who covers the stretch of the south coast of the Black Sea from west towards east is to be found, according to Procopius, in the ancient town of Apsarus (today Gonio in Georgia, 12 km south of Batumi). In the opinion of the Byzantine historian and not only his, the ancient name of the town was Apsyrτος, from the man treacherously killed by Medea and Jason (αὕτη Ἄψυρτος τὸ παλαιὸν ὠνομάζετο, ὁμώνυμος τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ διὰ τὸ πάθος γεγενημένη. ἐνταῦθα γὰρ φασιν οἱ ἐπιχώριοι ἐξ ἐπιβουλῆς Μηδείας τε καὶ Ἰάσονος τὸν Ἄψυρτον ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀφανισθῆναι, καὶ δι' αὐτὸ τὴν ἐπωνυμίαν τὸ χωρίον λαβεῖν, 8.2.12.1-6), whose tomb was still extant at that time on the east side of the town. (τοῦτου δὲ τοῦ Ἀψύρτου καὶ τάφος ἐς τῆς πόλεως τὰ πρὸς ἀνίσχοντα ἥλιόν ἐστιν, 8.2.14.1-3). It has had its times of glory, having been enclosed with strong walls and adorned with a theatre and a hippodrome (αὕτη πόλις ἦν τὸ παλαιὸν πολυάνθρωπος, καὶ τείχους μὲν αὐτὴν περιέβαλε μέγα τι χρῆμα, θεάτρῳ δὲ καὶ ἵπποδρόμῳ ἐκαλλωπίζετο, 8.2.14.3-5), but in Procopius' age it had completely fallen into decay. From the flourishing town only the foundations of the wall now remained (νῦν δὲ δὴ αὐτῶν ἄλλο οὐδὲν ἀπολέλειπται, ὅτι μὴ τῆς κατασκευῆς τὰ ἐδάφη, 8.2.14.7-8).

If, in all the variants of the Argonauts' legend, Apsyrτος was the son of king Aietes and the stepbrother of Medea, the sources contradict each other on his status and role in the moment of his sister's eloping with Jason, who took away the precious Golden Fleece. The first category of sources presents Apsyrτος as a child that his sister murders right in Aietes' palace (Sophocles,

*Kolchides*, frg. 319; Euripides, *Medea*, 167-1334; Callimachus, frg. 411), or drags him along with her on board the ship Argos, where she assassinates him, chops him up and throws the pieces into the waves of the river Phasis (Pherekydes, frg. 73), in the waters of the Black Sea (Apollodorus, I, 9, 24; Zenobius, IV, 92) or on the coast of Scythia Minor (Cicero, *De imperio Cnaei Pompei*, 22; Ovidius, *Tristia*, III, 9, 27 et seq., *Heroides*, VI, 129 et seq., XII, 113 et seq.) in order to force her pursuers to stop for a while to gather the mortal remains of Apsyrtos and to bury them according to the tradition. The second category of sources depicts Apsyrtos as a grown-up man, to whom his father entrusts the pursuit and the bringing back home of Medea, by force. Of course, he did not achieve his purpose, but was murdered by Jason with the help of his cunning sister (Apollonius Rhodius, IV, 305; Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 23; *Argonautica Orphica*, 1022 et seq.).

The scene of the awful assassination is also located by the sources in three extremely different places, far away from each other. These are the town of Tomis (today Constanța in Romania) on the west shore of the Black Sea (Ovidius, *Tristia*, III, 9; Steven of Byzantium, s.v. *Tomeus*; Apollodorus, I, 9, 24, 2), the Apsyrtides islands, located in the Adriatic Sea, on the high seas of the Istrian Peninsula (Plinius, *Naturalis Historia*, III, 151; Strabo, VII, 315), and Apsarus on the eastern coast of the Pontus (Arrian, *Periplus Ponti Euxini* 7; Steven of Byzantium, s.v. Apsyrtides).

All this mythical material may shed light onto the sources, the options and the reasons for selecting the information provided by Procopius about Apsyrtos. First of all, it seems obvious to us that the Byzantine writer does not intend to enter the polemic around the details of Apsyrtos' legend that he considers a reality, whose elucidation he plans with the scientific methods of the historian. For him, the fact that at Apsarus in the Pontic region the tomb of Medea's brother was still visible represents the supreme and irrefutable argument for locating the dreadful crime in that precise place. Since, with regard to the other aspects of the legend there wasn't so tangible evidence, Procopius prefers to mention only those points that were not engendering contradictions between the sources (the fact that Apsyrtos murdering was owed to the perfidiousness of the couple Jason – Medea). This tendency is pushed to extreme when the historian from Caesarea does not mention Apsyrtos as Medea's (step) brother, but refers to him with the most general appellative of "man", that gives rise to a well-inspired pun due to the addition "made to disappear from among the men" through the artfulness of Medea and Jason (ἐξ ἐπιβουλῆς Μηδείας τε καὶ Ἰάσονος τὸν Ἄψυρτον ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀφανισθῆναι, 8.2.12.4-5).

The presence in Arrian's work of the same location for Apsyrtos' tomb forces us to wonder whether the Bythinian historian from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.

represented the source of inspiration for the data provided by Procopius. First of all, let's pay attention to the statements of Arrian who has visited the town of Apsaros, passing into review and paying the salaries of the five garrisons that were settled there: "It is said that the village of Apsaros was once called Apsyrτος, since here had died Apsyrτος because of Medea, and Apsyrτος tomb is shown here. Later, the name was corrupted by the barbarians dwelling in the region" (ὁ δὲ Ἄψαρος τὸ χωρίον λέγουσιν ὅτι Ἄψυρτος ἐκαλεῖτο πάλαι ποτέ· ἐνταῦθα γὰρ τὸν Ἄψυρτον ὑπὸ τῆς Μηδείας ἀποθανεῖν, καὶ τάφος Ἄψυρτου δείκνυται, ἔπειτα διαφθαρῆναι τὸ ὄνομα ὑπὸ τῶν περιόικων βαρβάρων, 6.3.1-5). In fact the small amount of information provided by Arrian is to be found also in Procopius' work. However the Caesarea born writer also mentions a novel element – the exact location of Apsyrτος' tomb on the east side of the town (τούτου δὲ τοῦ Ἄψυρτου καὶ τάφος ἐς τῆς πόλεως τὰ πρὸς ἀνίσχοντα ἥλιόν ἐστιν, 8.2.14.1-3). Moreover, he proves himself interested in the present state of the afore mentioned settlement. Considering these circumstances, we believe that, being acquainted with the text of Arrian' s *Periplus Ponti Euxini*, as it is unquestionably proven by the general comparison of the two writings, Procopius aspired in a programmatic way to complete and improve the information afforded by his forerunner, on the basis of his own sources.

The same striving for progress in the scientific research and for the restoration of the truth that permanently drives Procopius is also obvious in the passage in which he raises the point of the exact geographical confinement of the Colchians and of the Trebizondians and, implicitly, of their supposed neighbourhood. In contrast with the much too numerous Byzantine authors, who were content with taking over in a slavish way the geographic or ethnographic information present in the works of their predecessors, the more so if those were considered authorities in the field, the historian from Caesarea subjects the information, as far as possible, to a critical examination. His goal is just to correctly inform his reader, and not to state his own merits by comparison with the previous writers, as Procopius is able to avoid the easy temptation of boastfulness and empty polemics. Illustrative for this line of action is his decision not to cite the writer he is contradicting. For example, in the passage we discuss, he simply avers that "with good reasons would somebody be astonished by those who state that the Colchians are neighbours of the Trebizondians" ("Ὡστε εἰκότως θαυμάσειεν ἄν τις τῶν Κόλχους φημένων Τραπεζουντίοις ὁμόρους εἶναι, 8.2.15.1-2). In spite of Procopius' discretion, the identification of the sources that he tends to distance himself from is not too difficult, since he almost quotes from the same *Periplus Ponti Euxini* of Arrian ("And the Colchians are the neighbours of the Trebizondians, just as Xenophon says,

Τραπεζουντίοις μὲν, καθάπερ καὶ <Ξενοφῶν> λέγει, Κόλχοι ὄμοροι, 11.1.1-2). In this way, we discover on one side why Procopius uses the plural "those" in the afore mentioned statement and, on the other side, which was the source of an error lasting for almost one thousand years in the Greek literature, mainly because of the unchallenged authority that Xenophon was enjoying. In the fourth book of his *Anabasis* (8, 22) the latter one had narrated the arrival of the Greek mercenaries headed by himself at Trebizond: "An inhabited Greek city in the Black Sea, Sinope's colony in the land of the Colchians" (εἰς Τραπεζοῦντα πόλιν Ἑλληνίδα οἰκουμένην ἐν τῷ Εὐξείνῳ Πόντῳ, Σινωπέων ἀποικίαν, ἐν τῇ Κόλχων χώρα, 4.8.22.2-4). Also, the Athenian historian has shown how the Greek soldiers had made a thirty days halt in the nearby villages of the Colchians that they didn't hesitate to loot (ἐνταῦθα ἔμειναν ἡμέρας ἄμφι τὰς τριάκοντα ἐν ταῖς τῶν Κόλχων κώμαις· κἀντεῦθεν ὀρμώμενοι ἐλῆζοντο τὴν Κολχίδα, 4.8.22.4-23.2). The confusion between the local inhabitants of the regions of Pontus and Colchis, respectively, is due firstly to the fact that the *Ten Thousands* have come on their way across a flow called also Phasis on its first sector (μετὰ τοῦτο ἐπορεύθησαν ἐπὶ σταθμοὺς ἀνὰ πέντε παρασάγγας τῆς ἡμέρας παρὰ τὸν Φᾶσιν ποταμόν, 4.6.4.1-5.1). This was not the Phasis river from the legend of the Argonauts (today Rioni in Georgia), which discharges its waters into the Black Sea, but Araxes (Rakhsi in Georgian), a tributary of the Caspian Sea that is nowadays named on Turkish territory by the similar name of *Fasin Su*. Of course, the confusion was facilitated by the poor geographic knowledge of the Greeks about a region close to the limits of their known world and about which more legends than precise data were afloat during the classical period.

Even Procopius paradoxically starts his attempt to re-establish the truth from the legend of the Argonauts which he perceives not only as a historical reality, but also as a reliable source of geographical information. In order to fight off the statements concerning the vicinity of the Trebizondians and Colchians he avers: "in this manner, it would seem that Jason, after snatching away the Golden Fleece, together with Medea, did not flee towards Greece and his native lands, but, on the contrary, towards Phasis and the inland barbarians." (ταύτη μὲν γὰρ καὶ τὸ δέρας ζὺν τῇ Μηδεΐα συλῆσας Ἰάσων οὐκ ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα καὶ τὰ πάτρια ἤθη φυγῶν φαίνοιτο, ἀλλ' ἔμπαλιν ἐπὶ Φᾶσιν τε ποταμόν καὶ τοὺς ἐνδοτάτῳ βαρβάρους, 8.2.15.2-16.1). The reasoning of the historian is not quite clear, seeming even out of context. However we can be certain in asserting that Procopius rebuts from the very beginning the variant of the legend according to which the Argonauts would have returned in Greece by a roundabout way that would have led them along Phasis river down to the Ocean, then through the Red Sea and the Libyan

Desert, to finally reach the Mediterranean (Pindarus, *Pythics*, IV, 26; Antimachos of Colophon, frg. 65). Only one possibility remains – that they came back through the Black Sea – irrespectively of the route followed afterwards. In this context, for the vicinity of the Colchians and Trebizondians to hinder the Argonauts in heading towards their homeland, the Trebizond should have been situated eastward of Colchis, fact that neither Arrian and Xenophon, nor any other author had previously alleged. Consequently, Procopius' argument is not at all sound and doesn't render more trustworthy the geographical description of the Pontus. What remains symptomatic, is however Procopius' tendency to resort to arguments taken over from the expedition of the Argonauts, in order to support a statement about the geography of the region.

Conversely, the historian does not hesitate to amend some elements of the legend in question, based upon the real geographical coordinates of the Pontic region. Thus, talking about the river Phasis, which springs from the Caucasus massif and flows into the Black Sea, he quotes the opinion according to which this one would separate Europe (on its right bank) from Asia (on the left) (τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐν ἀριστερῇ κατιόντος τοῦ ροῦ Ἀσία ἐστὶ, τὰ δὲ ἐν δεξιῇ Εὐρώπη ὠνόμασται, 8.2.28.1-29.1). Moreover, he specifies that all the dwellings of the autochthonous Lazians are situated on the right bank of the river (κατὰ μὲν οὖν τὴν τῆς Εὐρώπης μοῖραν ξύμπαντα Λαζῶν τὰ οἰκία ξυμβαίνει εἶναι, 8.2.29.1-3), while on the left side has once existed the Roman camp Petra, but nowadays not even one village or fortification remains (ἐπὶ θάτερα δὲ οὔτε πόλισμα οὔτε ἄλλο τι ὀχύρωμα οὔτε κόμην τινὰ λόγου ἀξίαν Λαζοὶ ἔχουσι, πλὴν γε δὴ ὅτι Πέτραν Ῥωμαῖοι ἐνταῦθα ἐδείμαντο πρότερον, 8.2.29.3-30.1). Influenced by these geographical facts, Procopius categorically contradicts the opinion of the natives who consider that the Golden Fleece would have stood on the right European bank of Phasis, based on a simple reasoning: Medea and Jason wouldn't have managed to escape with the Golden Fleece, if the sanctuary where it was standing hadn't been separated by the Phasis river from Aietes' palace and from the other dwellings of the Colchians (οὐ γὰρ ἂν, οἶμαι, λαθὼν τὸν Αἰήτην Ἰάσων ἐνθένδε ἀπηλλάσσετο ζὺν τῇ Μηδείᾳ τοὶ δέρας ἔχων, εἰ μὴ τὰ τε βασιλεία καὶ τὰ ἄλλα τῶν Κόλχων οἰκία τοῦ χωρίου διείργετο Φάσιδι ποταμῷ, ἵνα δὴ τὸ δέρας ἐκεῖνο κείσθαι ξυνέβαινε, 8.2.31.1-8.2.31.5). Moreover, the Caesarea born writer calls on his behalf the assertions of the poets who have written on the topic (ὃ δὴ καὶ οἱ ποιηταὶ παραδηλοῦσιν οἱ τὰ τοιαῦτα ἀναγραφάμενοι, 8.2.31.5-6), seeming to completely forget what he had claimed explicitly just one chapter before, namely that "history is far away from legend" (μῦθος γὰρ ἱστορίαν παρὰ πολὺ κειχωρίσθαι οἶμαι, 8.1.13.1-2) and even what he had stated in the

previous phrase – that poets forge legends (οἱ ποιηταὶ [...] μυθολογοῦσι, 8.2.30.3-4).

We believe that the text Procopius is directly referring to is the epic poem *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes. Towards the end of the second book, while recounting the arrival of Jason and his companions in the land of Colchis the Hellenistic poet offers exact topographic data concerning the region: "On the left hand they had the precipitous Caucasian mountains and the town Kytai from Aia, on the other side the field of Ares and the / sacred grove of the god, where the tireless snake was guarding the fleece hung by the branches of an oak tree in leaf" (ἔχον δ' ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ χειρῶν / Καύκασον αἰπήεντα Κυταιίδα τε πτόλιν Αἴης, / ἐνθεν δ' αὖ πεδῖον τὸ Ἄρηιον ἱερά τ' ἄλση / τοῖο θεοῦ, τόθι κῶας ὄφις εἴρυτο δοκεύων, / πεπτάμενον λασίοισιν ἐπὶ δρυὸς ἀκρεμόνεσσιν, 2.1266-1270). If we take into account the fact that on the left means for Apollonios upstream of the river, and for Procopius downstream we come to the conclusion that the two topographies coincide. Similarly, although more vague in description, seems to proceed the author of the *Argonautica Orphica*, who states that "in front of the palace and of the fortified river" there was a stronghold with towers, locked up with iron bars and enclosed by seven precincts, inside which the ill-fated grove which was housing the Golden Fleece was lying (Πρόσθε γὰρ Αἰήταο δόμων ποταμοῖο τ' ἔρυμνοῦ, / ἐννέ' ἐπ' ὀργυῶν ἔρκος περιμήκετον ἄντην / φρουρεῖται πύργοισι καὶ εὐξέστοισι μύδροισιν, / ἐπτά περὶ στεφάνοισι κυκλούμενον, 894-897).

Conclusively, Procopius' references to the legend of the Argonauts are important because they prove its perfect survival in the conscience of the cultured Greeks during the sixth Byzantine century. To our author the expedition of Jason and his companions does not seem a legendary event, but a historical reality. To unravel its secrets he resorts to the rigorous methods of the historian, who is continually searching for proofs and arguments. Simultaneously, Procopius does not hesitate to fully make use of his critical, rationalist spirit in order to separate the truth from the legend, although he not always manages to successfully reach his goal. Well acquainted with the similar works of his predecessors (Xenophon, *Anabasis*; Arrian, *Periplus Ponti Euxini*), he permanently aims to surpass them, avoiding at the same time the temptation of entering a superficial polemics with their authors. Moreover, the expedition of the Argonauts and the geographical realities of the Pontic region tend to form an integral unity, since the historian resorts, in a biunivocal manner, to the legend in order to explain the topography of the Black Sea and, respectively, the geographical realities for establishing the correct variant of the legend.